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CHRISTIANS, POLITICS AND PARTIES

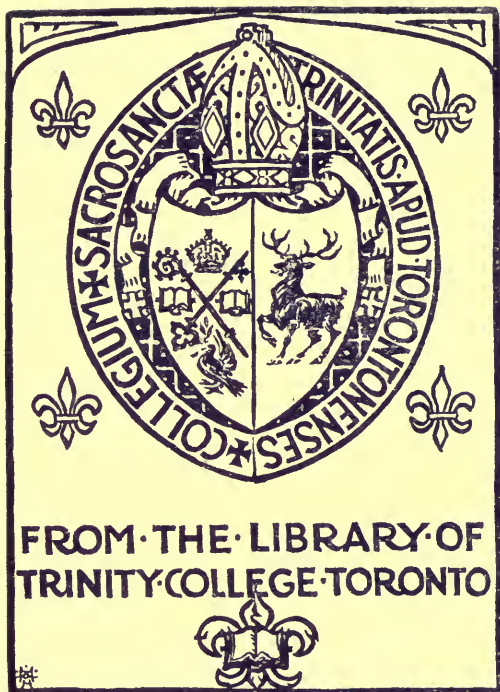
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CHRISTIANS POLITICS AND PARTIES

By W. G. PECK

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Christians, Politics and Parties

THE Industrial Christian Fellowship declares that it “stands for Christ and His principles, independent of party.” You will notice that it does *not* say that it has no concern with political or with economic questions. Indeed, in the course of its history the Fellowship has had a great deal to say on these subjects, not without effect. Yet it has managed to speak without violating its own claim that it is entirely independent of all political parties.

What does this mean? Does it mean that the I.C.F. sits permanently upon the fence? Or that it seeks some airy synthesis of the present programmes of all parties? Or that it is a political “trimmer”? Or that it has nothing to say beyond advising politicians to be good men? It means none of these things. We shall see that what the I.C.F. position implies is a doctrine of politics which is profoundly necessary to-day, if politics is to recover its true function in the life of our community. The I.C.F. desires to see a valid and vigorous political life in Britain. What it means by standing for Christ and His principles independent of party is that in order to reach the required renovation of politics, it is necessary to start outside politics. For the foundation of politics lies in a pre-political sphere.

When we ask what is the Church's place in political activity, we are not asking to which party Christians should belong. That question must appear futile to anyone who possesses the slightest degree of political realism. Much of the misunderstanding of past days has arisen from the assumption, either open or implicit, that if a man is a Christian he ought therefore necessarily to be in this party or that. At Election times, while the vicar has sometimes been heard offering prayers for the success of the Conservative candidate, other

ministers of religion in the same neighbourhood have appeared upon platforms either announcing the identity of Christianity and Liberalism, or plainly suggesting that a man who calls himself a Christian is either a rogue or an imbecile if he does not support the Labour Party. And all this has been a grave scandal to the cause of religion, and a hindrance to the growth of a Christian sociology. It has arisen out of a gross confusion of means and ends. It has reflected the confusion of our general public thought.

Many years ago, I stood one sunny morning in a certain suburban road in Manchester, conversing with an Archdeacon and a University Professor. It was Election Day, and the signs of party activities were very visible. I asked my two friends whether they had recorded their votes, and they replied that they had. Then I remarked that we were three Christian men, and that without wishing to intrude upon the secrecy of the ballot, I would surmise that we had each voted for a different candidate. It turned out that we had! The Professor looked rather sad about it; but the Archdeacon was unmoved. "And why not?" he asked.

"And why not?" Just so. But the Archdeacon's question would really be fully justified only if politics were performing its proper function. In the conditions which have prevailed in recent times, it is not so easy to say whether or not it matters enormously for which party a Christian votes, because party philosophies have become increasingly confused, and the notion of what politics itself is supposed to be doing has grown vague and formless. That situation has not improved with the passing years; and to-day we need some vital Christian thinking about the whole subject.

What is the function of politics? The Christian Fathers in the early centuries of the Church's history mostly took a view rather like that of the Roman Seneca. They supposed that the political State, and all political action, had become necessary only because man was a sinner. And no doubt human sin has necessitated some of the permanent features of government. But at a later time, the great St. Thomas Aquinas went back to the teaching of the Greek philosopher Aristotle, and argued that politics is a necessity for man, not merely because he is a sinner, but because he is man: that politics is a genuine expression of certain elements in the human nature which God

has created. That view became the settled view of the main Christian Church tradition.

We come back to our question, What is the function of politics? What is the task of the State, which is the political executive? We must here recall the truth that the State is not to be identified with the Community, as if the two words meant the same thing. The Community is the natural society of men. It includes all those associative activities in which men engage, because it belongs to their nature to do so—the family, the farm, the factory, the cricket club, the literary society, the village, the city, the nation. *One* of these associative activities, and in some senses the supreme one, is the State. The State is an organ or instrument of the Community and its task is to protect and to co-ordinate the other natural activities so that they do not fall into confusion or decay: to preserve or create the conditions in which the natural life of man can remain healthy and vigorous.

This, however, cannot be done without some idea of what constitutes a healthy and vigorous natural life for man. And we cannot discover that idea without having some notion of what man is, in his *wholeness*. And we cannot see man in his wholeness without perceiving the *purpose* of his existence. We need then, as the background of all our politics, *a dogma of purpose, based upon a definite conception of man*. But it is neither the State itself nor any political party that can provide either the conception or the dogma. The conception of man and the dogma of purpose, while they are fundamentally necessary for true politics, must arise outside the political sphere. They must arise in the heart and mind of the Community; they belong to religion, are born in religion, and can be sustained only by religious faith and doctrine. The Ends of man's life are perceived by religion. It is the *means* of reaching those ends through the natural human activities that is the proper province of politics.

It is, in the last resort, religion that holds the Community together. When the State is found assuming that it is itself the basis of the Community, the reason for man's existence, and the final authority over his whole life, it is certain that an unnatural and disastrous course is being pursued. Something has gone very wrong with the whole ordering of man's life. He has lost his way.

When a community loses its religious sense of purpose, it begins to go sick and sour. It shows signs of falling to pieces. It loses that vision by which it has been able to direct its political action toward the great human ends. It then tends to look to the State to supply it with a purpose and hold it together. But the State, as such, is not intended to do the work of religion. It does not dwell in the realm of ultimate human ends. It is properly an instrument, a means, for realising those ends which are illumined by religious faith and belong to man in his wholeness. And when the State is thrust into the position of final mastery over human life, the first thing it is tempted to do is to establish its own absolute power. This occurred in various European countries at the beginning of the modern era, after the break-up of the mediæval community. We have seen it happening again, in yet more monstrous ways, in our own time, at the end of the modern era.

But mere abstract power is meaningless. The State's power must be a power to do this or that—something definite. But when the State has been cut off from the vision of man's wholeness, the purpose of his life and the truth of his nature, owing to the decline of the community's religion, what happens is that the State itself becomes the prey of one of the uprooted elements of man's disordered nature. The State may become merely the happy hunting ground of some privileged class. Or it may become purely militarist. Or it may become the servant of a false economic purpose, and find that it has to build up great armaments in order to secure that purpose. In either of these instances it begins to shape the whole life of the community toward a false end. This will vitiate all its political activity and undermine all political discussion, however brilliant, with a false assumption.

Look at the political history of England in the nineteenth century. Both Conservatives and Liberals eventually accepted the Industrial Revolution and its economy as the orthodox basis of England's life. This meant that whatever we might profess in the sphere of religion, we could live only by an everlasting expansion of industrial exports, the decline of agriculture, the massification of our population in the great urban sprawls, and at length an ever-intensifying conflict with the nations which were following our lead, for trade in the

world market. That was the basis. That was the accepted *dogma*. The political parties were agreed about that. They maintained a brilliant discussion as to what, all things considered, was the best means of carrying it out in practice. And when the Labour Party arrived on the scene, it did not really question this basis. It only asked that the workers should receive a larger portion of the profits and better conditions of life *within that scheme of things*. If it also asked for universal peace within the same scheme, it was unconsciously crying for the moon.

When, however, after the first world war, it became increasingly clear that the whole economy of the Industrial Revolution had run into a blind alley, the long political discussion ceased. The bottom had been knocked out of it. There was nothing to talk about, unless a new, fundamental *dogma* could be found. The parties, dimly aware that there was no longer any inclusive *purpose* left, became mere associations for maintaining their own power and privilege. But this could not carry on the political life of the country, and eventually we were forced to contrive a National Government, the main object of which seemed to be to do nothing at all, for fear lest any positive action might bring the whole structure of society about our ears. The *status quo* at home, and "appeasement" abroad! We were lost in a fog, and we had decided to stand still and wait for the return of the light. But no light came from our secularised and stricken world. All we got was the black-out and the bombs.

Perhaps we may now begin to discern what is the chief political need of this hour. Great as may be the need for a definite social and economic programme, there is a need vastly more important, and if this is not met, we shall make no genuine recovery. Indeed, the programmes devised by men who have no relevant religious philosophy, by men who dwell only in the isolated fields of economics or politics, are likely to be full of danger. They are likely to be no more than attempts to adjust man and his society to the necessities imposed by the false decisions of the past. Probably they will represent only a further drift toward the secularised mass State as the solution of all problems. The chief political need of our time is for such a conception of the truth of man's nature and destiny, such a grasp of the divinely intended

purpose of human life, as will give direction, certainty and vigour to our search for the political means to implement man's nature and serve God's purpose in this world. And while mere politics cannot satisfy this need, political discussion will remain uncertain, muddled and befogged until the need is satisfied.

There can be no intelligent political discussion unless there is an agreement between the various political parties upon a fundamental dogma of political purpose. That is to say, there must at least be some consensus of belief as to what politics ought to be aiming at. Unless there is such an agreement, the so called "political" discussion will not be truly political at all. It will become one of two things. It will be merely a wrangle between half-baked philosophies, or a quarrel between different groups of people concerning the fruits of office. There must be a dogma of human purpose before there can be a rational discussion about the means of attaining that purpose; *and politics is concerned with the means*. Our trouble to-day is that we have no such agreed philosophy of life. That was the basic reason for the political bewilderment, the decline of political intelligence, and the growing disrepute of politics in the period between the two wars; and failing a rejuvenation of the soul of our nation, and the acceptance of an overmastering human purpose, there will be either a return of apathy or a wilder confusion after the present war is over.

It is at this point that we may see the tremendous meaning of the Industrial Christian Fellowship's claim for "Christ's principles independent of party." This does not demand the silencing of political discussion. It provides the basis upon which such discussion may intelligently and fruitfully proceed. It does not seek to destroy parties; but rather to provide them with genuine significance.

The need is to declare what man is intended by God to be doing in this world; and our ideas about that will depend upon what we think of man himself and of his final destiny. Now, the Christian Faith declares that what imprints upon man his essential character as man is the two-fold truth that he is created for a destiny *beyond* this world, but that he has to reach that destiny through his contacts *within* this world. He is created for the Supernatural; but he is placed in the natural order, and he must reach his Supernatural End through his

activities in the natural world. He is created for communion with God; but he cannot achieve this unless at the same time he is achieving harmony with nature and with his fellow men.

Modern men, whether they are Christians or not, are accustomed to the idea that the Church's business is to speak about the Supernatural. They are largely ignorant of the fact that the Church has also a duty to speak about the natural. She must have a "theology of the natural." A moment's reflection will make this clear. If you declare that man is in this world in order to reach to a world beyond, if he is placed within "nature" in order that he may find his way to God, it is obvious that this must affect your judgment as to how he ought to approach the task of living and acting in this world. It must affect your notion as to what are the true social purposes. The Supernatural must define the meaning and the uses of the natural, for the natural is seen as the minister or instrument of the Supernatural.

Thus there are certain theological judgments to be applied to man's daily life and work. For example, the object of work must be the satisfaction of human need. "Production is on account of consumption." That is the function of economic action, upon its own level, toward the health of man's whole nature, which is to find its crowning satisfaction in communion with God. It follows that money, so far from being the supreme object of that economic activity, is only its servant. Money can serve the Supernatural end only as a means of distributing goods and services to men. If we had space to draw out all the conclusions of this, it could be shown that our modern economic structure has been founded upon a theological heresy.

Or again, work, if it is a means of reaching God, must be the associative action of men, in a co-operative attempt to satisfy the needs which God has implanted in their nature. It ought to draw men together in fellowship and strengthen their community. If, as in the modern world, you find that work takes place under a system which antagonizes men, classes and nations, you may be sure that the system itself is theologically false. Or yet again, trade between nations ought to be of mutual benefit to the nations concerned. It ought to be a civilising influence. If it becomes a veiled warfare, if it is an attempt of nations to get other nations into monetary debt,

and to secure their own life by embarrassing the lives of people in other lands, the true nature of trade is distorted, and again we see that men are trying to live in the world by ignoring the natural laws of God.

In fact, the whole acceptance of economic purpose as the main purpose of life: the acceptance, in Professor Tawney's words, of "a naturalistic political arithmetic in place of theology as the guide of life," is the root heresy of the modern world, which has brought in its train the other heresies which we have mentioned. And these, in their turn, have distorted men's views of the family, education and culture. They have brought about unnatural ways of life. Populations have been crowded into vast, sprawling areas which are not worthy of the names of city or town, while on the one hand the English countryside has been dying, and on the other hand, as a result of the same economy, the resources of the soil in lands overseas have been rapaciously exploited and exhausted.

All this has taken place because the modern world has separated its natural life from its Supernatural End. The consequence is that it lacks the power of true judgment in the natural order. And it can have no true politics, no true power of protecting and co-ordinating man's natural activities, until it recovers that power of right judgment in the natural order. Nor can it find that power for itself. It certainly cannot be provided by politicians or economists merely as politicians or economists. It must spring from the Church which is the community redeemed: the community brought back, in principle, to the divine purpose. This recovery by the Church of its teaching function concerning man's natural life is actually taking place to-day. At Malvern, at the Archbishops' Albert Hall Meeting, in the studies of hundreds of Christian groups, in the day to day work of the Industrial Christian Fellowship, in the Church Union Oxford Summer School of Sociology, this process is going on. It is in no sense an activity of party politics. It proceeds in a realm beyond politics, where alone the true *purpose* of all politics can be discovered.

The political task of the Church is to inspire its people with the vision of divine purpose realised in and through the natural life of mankind: with the power to see the valid objectives of social and economic activity. And as her people grasp the meaning of a Christian social philosophy, they will be able to

see with fresh eyes the vital relevance of the Gospel for the world of their times. Their own awakened conviction and zeal will spread, through their daily contacts in society. Thus, out of the living community may arise that Judgment of Purpose for which it is the task of politics to find the practical means. Politics itself will then recover meaning, and its proper function in the human order will become clear. If the community becomes convinced of the true natural purposes of its work, trade, finance, education, diplomacy, in relation to the changeless Supernatural End, the political discussion may become once again really intelligent. Men will see that politics is an argument about the ways and means of reaching those natural ends which belong to the wholeness of man's nature, and are his pathway to the vision of God.

There ought to be such a political argument, because human temperaments differ, human practical judgments differ, and only in discussion can they be tested, checked, co-ordinated. There may well be political parties, claiming support for this or that method, or demanding priority for the consideration of this or that question. Some of us are by nature conservative and indisposed for rapid changes. Others are temperamentally adventurous and experimental. So God has made us, and it is out of the tension between genuine human types that society and civilisation are forged. There is thus no reason, in principle, why Christians should not be found in different parties—each in the party to which he inclines by his own temperament and practical judgment. That is, when parties agree upon the broad objects of political action. But always, and even now in the present confusion of our politics, Christians must seek to exert within their parties an influence which will bring each party to an honest acceptance of those natural purposes which are the ministers of the supernatural. As the Christian intelligence and intention develop in actual political life, we may find ourselves delivered from the devastating alternative of deciding between a policy which denies the nature of man in the interests of money, and a policy which seeks to destroy the interests of money by denying the nature of man in some form of totalitarian State. This is the preposterous alternative to which our secularised politics is drifting. Only the Christian theology of man, considered as the teacher of the politician, can save us from it.

It is obvious that the Church itself can be of no "party." But this is not to say that it has no political duty. On the contrary, its task is the redemption of politics to its proper function: to convince the politician and the citizen that there are stable, permanent human ends to be served, and that party discussion is mere bickering or babble unless all parties are aware of them and seek to serve them. Thus, while Christians may justly be found in different parties, they must have a certain underlying unity in their approach to politics. Not long before the war, Prebendary Kirk and I were asked to meet a group of Members of Parliament of all parties. They were all Christians, and they told us that they had found that their common Christianity meant increasingly more to them, in their examination of political issues, than their party loyalties. Supposing that in every Parliamentary constituency the Christian voters of all parties were to meet in the same way—not to attempt political "conversions," but to insist upon the reality of the true political purpose, and to test the sincerity of parties in relation to those purposes—then, indeed, we might discover in practice the political significance and power of Christ's principles, independent of party but governing all politics and all parties.









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